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ABSTRACT

Post structural reader theories--i.e., theories that focus on the reader/viewer rather than the text as the creator of meaning--are considered in this paper in terms of their application to educational media research. Some key concepts of reader theories are defined as follows: (1) reading is the process of creating meaning while viewing an educational media presentation; (2) the text is the educational media presentation; (3) communities of viewers are those readers who share membership in a social, economic, professional, or other natural group and whose interpretations agree because of their membership in that group; and (4) intertextuality suggests either that certain meanings of one text are created only by the existence of related texts or that communication about shared practices or conventions may also be considered text. A preference for reception theory, one of several reader theories, is indicated because the author or producer's role is well explored in this approach. Reception theory is described as the belief that, although any text is open to interpretation, at specific points in time readings of the text become concretized by readers whose expectations have been determined by their culture. A discussion of how children learn from "Sesame Street" is presented in the context of this theory, and 13 references are listed. (MES)

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READER THEORIES AND EDUCATIONAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

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Reader Theories and Educational Media Analysis

Theories upon which most educational media research is based are usually behavioral or cognitive in nature. Even those studies which fail to state their theoretical framework, most often make assumptions which place them squarely in the behavioral or cognitive paradigm. These paradigms, while incorporating powerful psychological explanations for learning, neglect those social explanations for learning upon which so much of our knowledge is based. A few theories which incorporate social explanations for learning are those applied in the analysis of the languages of communication. Since media employ their own languages, they are ripe for such analysis. Some theories which investigate the creation and reception of media texts are structural and post structural reader theories. In fact, these theories have considerably advanced the field of media studies in England and the United States (Gitlin, 1980, Ellis, 1982, Hall, 1980, Heath and Skirrow, 1977). I believe they provide a rich vein for educational media reserachers to tap. They allow the investigation of social, cultural and historical issues which cannot be explored within a behavioral nor cognitive paradigm, therefore, in

this paper I will introduce the central concepts of post structural reader theories and consider their application to educational media.

Key Concepts

Post structural reader theories developed as a reaction against structural analysis in which the media text itself is of dominant interest. Structural analysists believe that messages are encoded in the media text and the viewing process is simply one of decoding a fixed message. Critiques of structuralism have indicated the shortsightedness of such a stance. If one considers the act of communication, the media text is only one element in that process. In any communication, messages are created by a sender or author, encoded in a text and differently decoded by readers or viewers. Therefore, the sender's or author's intent, the text and the reader/viewer become important parts of the analytical equation. To overcome this theoretical and pragmatic emphasis on text, post structural analysts began to focus on the reader/viewer as the creator of meaning. They believe that a reader/viewer creates meaning when interacting with a media text which is coded and in which the author's intent is embedded. Varying reader theories, such as, deconstruction (Derrida, 1977, Bloom, 1975, Hartman, 1979), reception theory (Jauss, 1970, Ingarden,

1973, Charvat, 1959), structural poetics (Culler, 1975), and interpretive strategies (Fish, 1980) define key concepts in a similar fashion.

Just as students interpret meaning in the process of reading a book, so do they create meaning in the process of viewing a film. One might say that this is one of the central ways in which they learn from film, but the concept of viewing can be constructed in a more active fashion. It can be called reading. Since the concepts of reading and text take on new connotations in reader theories, it is best to start with their definitions.

Reading in this case would be the process of creating meaning while viewing an educational media presentation. The presentation is a communication which has been encoded in signs and symbols which remain dormant until they are received by the viewer. The viewer, therefore, not the medium creates the meaning.

Text in this case would be the word used to describe the educational media presentation. The reason for the selection of this word is twofold. Texts are items that are read. By calling an educational film or video a text, one calls attention to the active role of interpreting by the viewer, not the passive role of viewing. Text also suggests

a book which has been written and constructed with careful intent. To call a film or video a text, calls attention to the fact that it has been constructed and hopefully dispels the myth of the opaqueness of visual media. It works against the notion that a camera is a window on the world.

Communities of Viewers are those readers who share membership in a social, economic, professional or other natural group and whose interpretations agree because of their membership in that group. This concept is not shared by all reader theories, but is prominent in the work of Stanley Fish (1980). Knowledge is often social and occurs because of one's membership in a group, not only because of one's individual brain function. For example, those readers who share membership in that ubiqiutous community of adolescents, read John Hughes' films of high school culture differently than do adults. Likewise, those elementary school children whose parents have refrained from supplying them with guns and war toys may interpret missles, presented as illustrations in computer programs, differently than those children who are familiar with war toys. Those high school students who have drug problems, read drug education films differently than those who do not have those problems. These are not just superficial reading

differences, nor simply different reactions to a film. For example, the organization of the text gives the reader access to syntactic meaning. In other words, the appearance of a weapon next to a math problem on a computer screen does not only invite the reader to interpret the juxtaposition symbolically, but syntactically as well. It invites readers to interpret the weapon as a function of the math concept, just as they would interpret a verb in a sentence as a function of the subject. It sets up expectaions.

Paradigmatic meaning, on the other hand , is supplied by syntax patterns or codes and readers can only work with codes with which they are familiar and they are only familiar with codes that come from the worlds or paradigms to which they have access or which they have experienced, in other words, their culture. The knowledge, therefore, acquired by a high school drug user comes, in part, from a language and a practice which has specific codes and conventions. It is these codes and conventions that users employ when contextualizing the information presented in drug education films. This is a separate reading of the film not just a separate reaction.

Intertextuality has two applications. The first

suggests that certain meanings of one text are created only by the existence of related texts. I will use John Hughes' films to illustrate this concept. Certain codes that are not unique to Hughes films, if read individually, are unique in combination. For example, in his first teen film, Sixteen Candles, Hughes establishes specific visual and speech codes for high school groups of "brains," "geeks," "jocks," "rich kids," and "outsiders." After this film, he never adds another category to his characterization of adolescents, therefore, he sets up viewer expectations that all his teens, with the exception of the film's hero and heroine, will be codified within one of these formulaic groups. His visual and speech codes are so effective in the first film, that he need only invoke them once or twice in the other films, before viewers can identify the group to which a character belongs. Consequently, the combination of codes in one Hughes film teaches viewers how to read his upcoming films, and they interpret plot and character development in relation to these codes. Certain meanings in one Hughes film text are created only by the existence of his other filmic texts. This is one alpication of "intertextuality".

The second application of the term stems from an extension of the term "text". It is clear that media presentations, such as film or television, may be called

texts, because they have been created and encoded by authors whose intentions are embedded in the media, but there is another kind of post structural text. For example, certain adolescent groups of the 1980s have specified practices and conventions in their everyday life. They communicate messages about these shared conventions, this shared knowledge through speech, behavior, clothing, consumer habits, etc. Communications about those practices and conventions may be called a text because it has been constructed by authors, teens; contains encoded messages and is interpreted by readers, teens. It was this teen text that Hughes incorporated in his films and it is the reason for his success. (Specifically ,he incorporated the text of middle to upper middle white midwestern adolescents.) He understands and reproduces speech, clothing and some of their behaviors. Since he employs their text, this application is another example of intertextuality.

I have explained the terms "reading," "text," "communities of viewers," and "intertextuality" to provide an entree to key concepts in reader theories. These concepts along with the methods of reader theories offer educational researchers an opportunity to understand how students locate meaning in media presentations they view. To illustrate the application of a reader theory I would now

like to suggest an analysis of Sesame Street.

Sesame Street and Recpetion Theory

Of the reader theories mentioned above, I prefer reception theory, because the author's or producer's role is well explored. Some theories, such as deconstruction, tend to valorize the reader and overlook the author. Additionally, reception theory offers the most practical guidlines for analysis. Some other theories provide engaging theory but little method. Reception theorists (Jauss, 1970, Ingarden, 1973) believe that any text is esentially open to interpretation, but that at specific points in time, readings of that text become "concretized" by readers whose expectations have been determined by their culture. If readers were interpreting a video text, their frame of reference for that interpretation would be created by an understanding of previous video texts, of similar themes and subjects, and by their life experiences.

How then would reception theory explain how children learn from Sesame Street? Most of the Sesame Street studies to date attempt to ascertain what a child remembers after viewing, but learning is much more than

remembering. Making sense of Sesame Street, creating meaning is learning as well. Yet what would researchers have to understand before they could answer the question, "How do a specific group of viewers make sense of Sesame Street? Notice that the focus question has shifted from an individual child to a group of children. That occurs because the researcher cares to access that social knowledge which children bring to the interpretation of Sesame Street. Groups or communities of viewers often interpret a program similarly, because of what they have learned by being a member of that group. For example, a late 1980s viewing audience would read Sesame Street differently than an early 1970s audience. Over the years, the program has been valorized. After the first wave of Sesame Street research, American educators and parents finally admitted that a three year old was ready for prereading and math skills. That message can be communicated to a 1980s viewer by the manner in which some parents approach the program. Today toddlers often play with Sesame Street dolls and toys, or listen to the reading of a Sesame Street book, sometimes before they start viewing the television program. The content and structure of other television programs are often part of toddlers' knowledge. Today middle class toddlers have had to make sense of attitudes toward the program;

toys, books and dolls from Sesame Street; and the form and content of other television programs before and during the viewing of a single program. Therefore, a researcher must understand the history of the program and the culture of its viewers.

. How then can a person tap into cultural knowledge by asking the simple question of a child, "What did you remember from that program?" (I do not suggest that we ignore that question, but ask additional ones.) We know that children read Sesame Street by filtering the program through the texts from their everyday life mentioned above, through the ways in which they have made sense of the world around them. Analysts can access these texts in a number of ways; by interviewing the children themselves, by watching them watch Sesame Street, by cataloguing their TV viewing habits, by observing their play, by interviewing child psychologists, by talking to parents, by observing parent child interaction and by observing the parent buying habits for the pre school child. The objective here would be to discover enough patterns in these diverse fields of reference, so that an accurate picture of the culture of a toddler emerges. All these fields of reference need not be tapped directly, but secondary sources, books and articles may be relied upon.

The author's or producer's intent should be explored. In the case of Sesame Street that would not be a hard task, because the origination of the program is well documented. A researcher could do some historical investigation of books about the program, of files and reports from the Children's Television Workshop, and could conduct interviews with the designers and producers. Just as one could examine the 1970s Sesame Street viewer, one could also compare the producers' intentions in 1970 with their intentions today and that could be accomplished through interviews. Perhaps there would be some designers or producers who had worked on the program for the 18 years of its existence.

The program itself should not be ignored, but examined for encoded meaning. Again the opportunity would exist for historical comparison. The analyst could identify those codes in the visual text which are drawn from the world of the toddler and used to convey messages about pre reading and math. (This is similar to the comparison made between the everyday texts of adolescents and the teen films of Jonh Hughes.) The best method, I believe, for idnetifying toddler codes is still a paradigmatic analysis drawn from semiotics.

Reception theory, therefore, offers the opportunity to answer the question, "How do specific groups of viewers

make sense of Sesame Street?" Reader theories in general offer us the opportunity to expand that favorite question of ours, "How does a student learn from a media presentation?", to a consideration of the culture of the student, so that we may answer the broader question, "How do students make sense of media presentations?"

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